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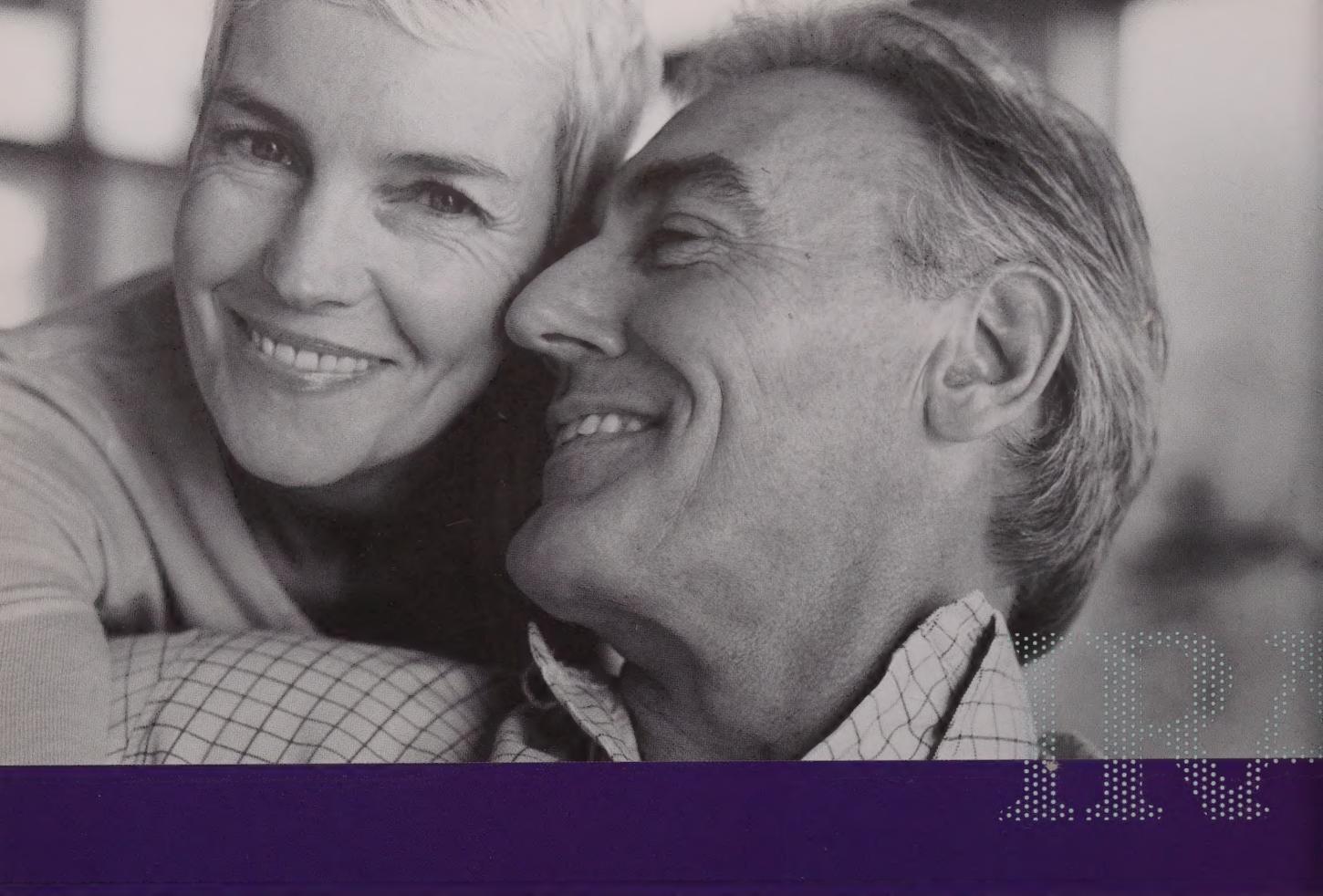
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Valuable information for every reader.

Dear Readers,

The delightful article by Sonia Albers in the December 2002 issue, "Expect the Unexpected: Thinking outside the (Gift) Box," was accompanied by a calendar of thoughts, prayers, and ideas for ways to celebrate the 12 days of Christmas. Several readers asked if we had a recipe that might work for the Cake of the Kings suggested for January 6. *LWT* staffer Beth McBride scoured numerous sources and uncovered a recipe that met the need. Below you will find a letter of thanks from one reader. (Many recipes exist for such a cake. If you would like to offer one of your own, go to the Women of the ELCA WebBoard at <http://webboard.elca.org:8080/~woboard> between April 15 and May 31, and enter the Cake of the Kings discussion.)

Are there other new traditions that we could start in our own home, community, or congregation? Whom would we invite? Whom might we inadvertently be leaving out? As we explore this month's theme, let us pray for open hearts and open minds, that we might seek to be all-embracing in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

—Nancy Goldberger, editor

Letters

I just had to write! I tried the Mardi Gras King Cake recipe. It was a lot like sweet bread. I filled one with cinnamon and sugar and the other with cream cheese. I took them to our Epiphany dinner at church. They were a hit, and everyone looked for the surprise inside. I couldn't find a plastic baby or a big dried bean, so I used a heart-shaped bead, representing the love of God. One of the little boys of the church found it. He was so happy! I think I have created a new tradition for our Epiphany dinners. Thanks again for your help in making this Christmas extra special!

Heidi Springsteen—Cumberland, Wis.

As a maker of scrapbooks, writer of journals, and self-proclaimed family historian, I began to rethink my recording of only happy and positive family activities after reading "The History of Us," by Marj Leegard

(*Give Us This Day*, January/February 2003). I had not thought of recording the sad and faith-questioning periods in our family's life. Perhaps we are doing our descendants an injustice by recording only the joyous and uplifting times.

Even in my journal of our day-to-day family events, I have always tried to keep the spirit positive. Should these writings reflect a more accurate picture of what our lives are—from the depths of despair to the heights of elation? Am I prepared to let future generations of readers feel all the emotions a family endures as the years go by? Will our descendants see our faith better by knowing our sad times and our reliance on Christ to get us through those difficult times? Marj Leegard's column certainly gave me something to think about.

Rachel Loven—Spicer, Minn.



The Gift of Friendship

by Marj Leegard

WE HAVE MOTHER'S DAY AND GRANDMOTHER'S DAY
AND SECRETARY'S DAY AND BOSS'S DAY AND DAYS
FOR ALMOST EVERY RELATIONSHIP THAT CAN BE
REMEMBERED FLORALLY OR CHOCOLATELY.

Is there such a thing as Friend's Day? If not, we should declare one. Friends are God's gift to our humanity. When we long to be reminded of what friendship is, we look at 1 John. There we are addressed as children, as friends, and even as "my dear friends." For another person to love me as a mother loves a child and then as friend and even as dear friend takes a great, loving heart.

A long time ago, my friend Idella lived diagonally across the way, a half-mile away. Idella would walk over to my house for coffee and a little something. I would walk home with her across the fields. If our conversation was not finished, she would turn around and walk part-way back again with me. In the busy farm days of summer, we did not have time for many of those long partings, but we cherished the time we had. Idella is gone now, but sometimes I look across the fields and remember.

1 John 4:7 says that we must love each other. It is a good thing that my friends have no choice in the matter, or not a one would have me for a friend. The love that friends have for us comes from God and not from our own exquisite loveliness. I forget birthday cards. I forget to return calls. In my enthusiasm to get a job done I make demands. I do not find time to stop for a visit. But my friends love me. I take and take and only dream of giving. They love me anyway. Sue and Annie and Sally

and Pat go miles out of their way and take chunks of time from their schedules to visit. I plan to visit them someday. They love me anyway. Clarys writes letters filled with warm desert sunshine. I send back winter woes. She loves me anyway. Jerry and Linde surprise us with a visit, and I gaze down the sidewalk in anticipation of another surprise, for I know we will see them again.

The love of friends is like the love of God for good reason. "Love comes from God" (1 John 4:7, Contemporary English Version). Without God-given love we become picky, whiny friends. I will see all your faults, and with great ease you will discover mine. I will remember every slight and carry it with me until the load becomes unbearable. And then I will seek a different friend, only to discover that friends without faults do not exist.

We must love each other, for we cannot do otherwise. When we were little children, we had a single best friend, and no one else could share the title. Now we are grown up and not so possessive, not so exclusive, for that is not the way God loves. God gives us many friends through the years and along our many paths.

God gives us facets and causes us to shine in different ways. Perhaps there will never be a holiday dedicated to friends, for one day could not contain the abundance. I would be bent double trying to carry all the friendship cards to the mailbox in one day. Thank God for friends!

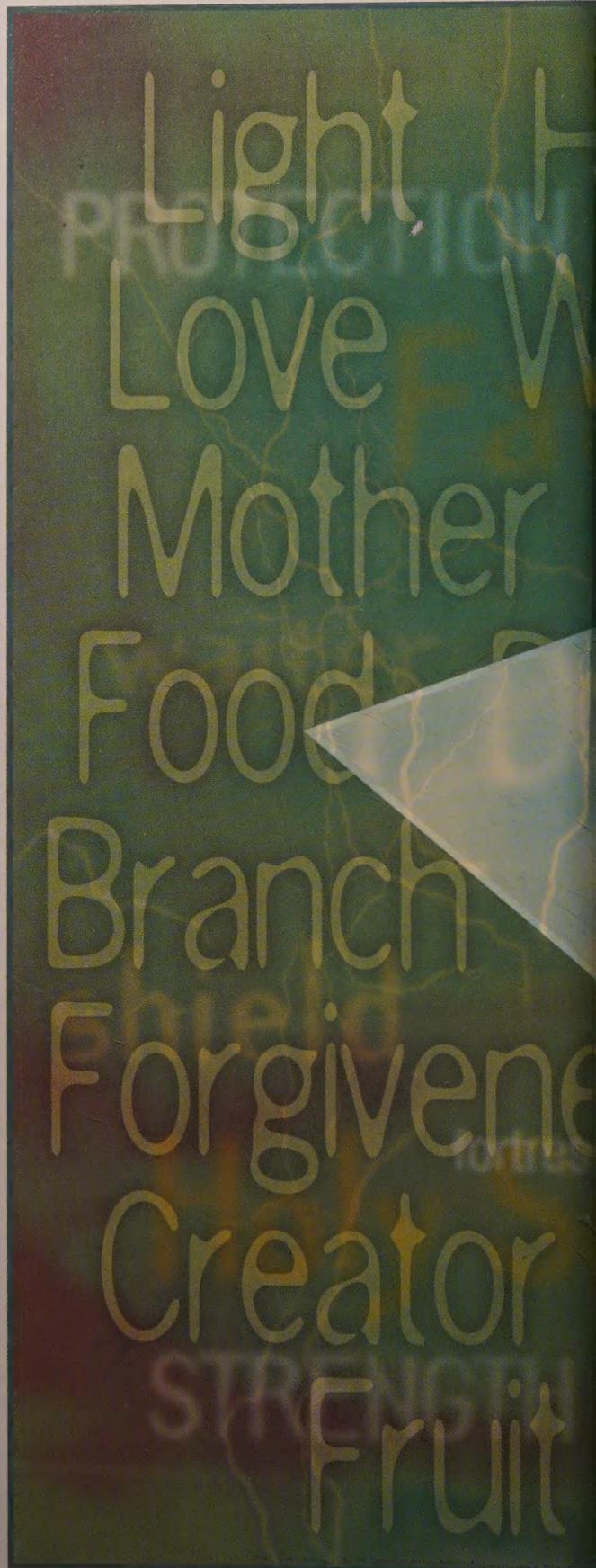
LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

THE TRIPLE MYST3RY

by Gail Ramshaw

HOW CAN WE DESCRIBE GOD?

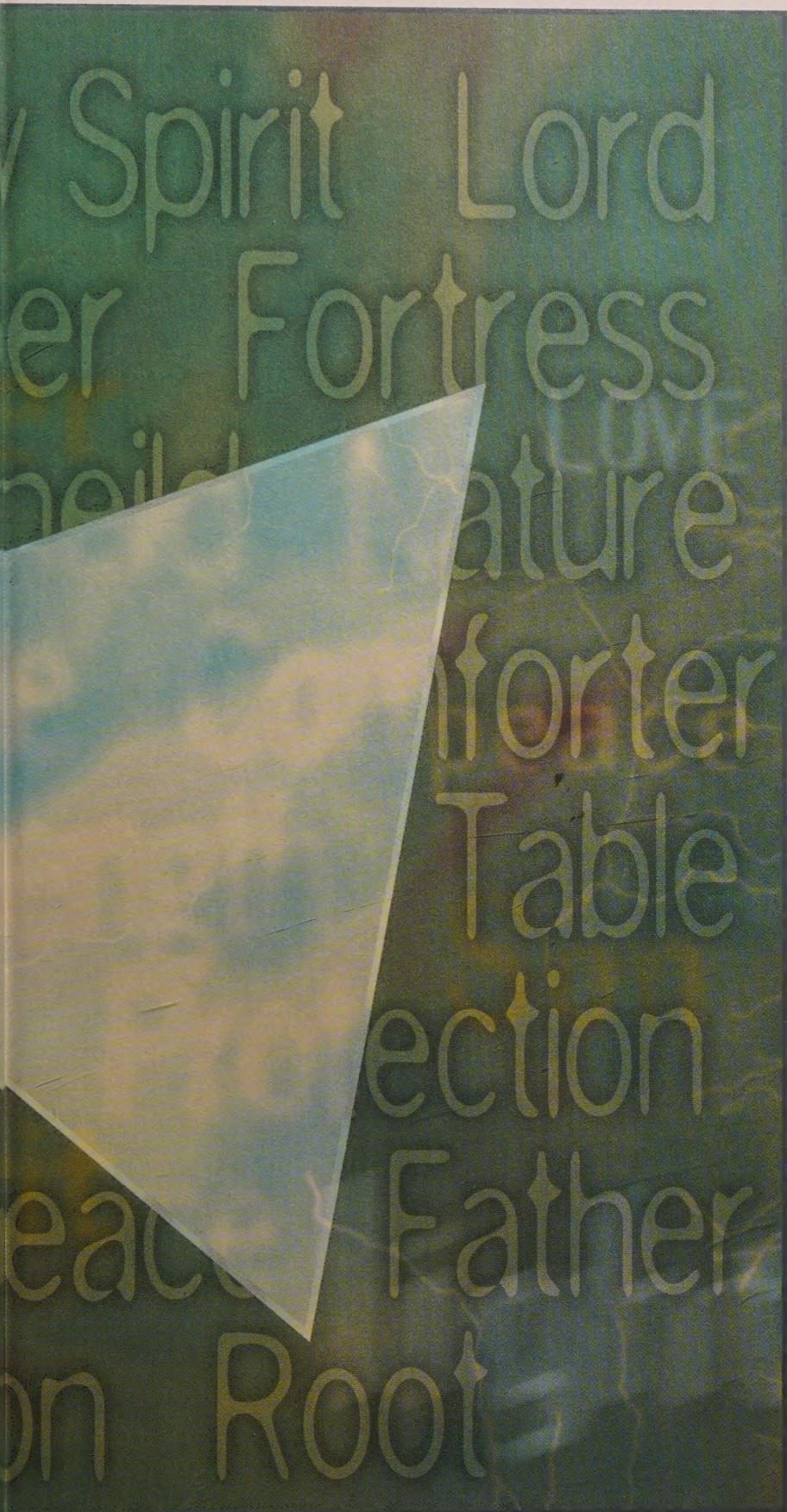
WELL, WE CAN'T. WHEN FAITH TRADITIONS SPEAK THE WORD GOD, THEY ARE ONLY POINTING IN THE GENERAL DIRECTION OF WHAT IS UNNAMEABLE. GOD SIGNIFIES THE MYSTERIOUS BEING BEYOND OUR MINDS, THE UNFATHOMABLE SOURCE OF ALL, THE AWESOME POWER OF LIFE, THE ABSOLUTE MEANING UNDERNEATH AND OUTSIDE ALL THAT WE CAN KNOW. WHEN RELIGIOUS PEOPLE FOOL THEMSELVES INTO THINKING THAT THEY FULLY COMPREHEND GOD, IT IS ONLY THEIR OWN GOLDEN CALF THEY ARE WORSHIPING. THEY ARE DANCING AROUND AN IDOL THAT THEY CRAFTED OUT OF THEIR OWN JEWELRY AND COINS. NO WONDER THEY ADORE IT! BUT EVEN IF A GOLDEN CALF IS A VALUABLE STATUE, IT IS ONLY A LIFELESS, IMPENETRABLE OBJECT; IT IS NOT THE ULTIMATE LIFE BEYOND OUR COMPREHENSION. THE STATUE BELONGS IN A MUSEUM.



STEP 1: THE MYSTERY

So when we talk about God, a pause before Mystery is always Step 1. As Augustine said 1,600 years ago, if you think you know what you are talking about, it is not God you are talking about! Our minds are too small to describe God, and our vocabulary is too tiny to embrace what is divine. So we shut our mouths for a while.

But none of the three great monotheistic religions of the world—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, those affirming the existence of one God—simply retreats into silence. All three religions expect that the faithful will meet regularly to pray together. And because we pray together, we need to use words, and we need to agree about which words to speak. We are not merely to have private opinions about the divine: it is together that we pray. So here is the fascinating complication: The Christian tradition, all the while acknowledging that God is beyond words, calls its people together each week in order to speak to and about God. And since Christianity believes that God is always alive in each culture, and able to be spoken about in each language, some words will be old, and some will be new.



STEP 2: THE IMAGES

In the search for language to describe God, we take up Step 2: We check with our history. What words did our ancestors use when they prayed? As Christians, we find our ancestors' words in the psalms. Psalm 18 is a fruitful place to begin.

Already in the opening verses of Psalm 18, the ancient author is trying to describe God. The poet offers a series of images to suggest that God is our strength: God is like a fortress, a castle with stout walls behind which we hide from the advancing army; God is like a shield protecting us from the arrows that are aimed at our heart; God is like a rock, giving us shade from the blazing sun, providing us with a sturdy foundation; God is like "the horn of my salvation," and not even Hebrew scholars agree on exactly what the psalmist had in mind here. Is the horn for mustering the troops in battle? Is it affixed to the corner of an altar? Is the horn attached to the front of my helmet, bringing to the warrior the strength of the raging bull?

But there is more. In verses 7–15, God is like the tumults of nature. God is like an earthquake, a volcano, spouting hailstones and fiery coals, shooting out lightning. God has nostrils that

are blasting evil to pieces. So if all we have is a nice god, if God is only a gorgeous sunset or fields of ripened grain, the psalmist confronts us with a different side of the divine. God is more than we knew, perhaps other than we want.

But there is more. In verse 28, God is our light. We can be secure even in the darkness. It is not that God will always change

**GOD
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UNIVERSE.
GOD IS NOT MERELY
MOTHER EARTH,
FOR GOD
IS NOT IN ANY WAY
PART OF OUR
UNIVERSE.**

the night into day, but that in the night, God is our light.

But there is more. At the beginning of the psalm, we were being attacked, and God is our protection. In verses 31–42, we are the attackers. We are out to destroy all that is evil. God is our drill sergeant, training our armies how to fight. God has given us supernatural powers, for verse 34 says that we can bend a bronze bow, and we smile as we pray the

psalm, for we know that without divine assistance we surely will not be able to bend a bow made of bronze.

But there is more. This psalm is full of images of protection, but what if I need freedom? What if I am dying slowly inside a prison? Verse 29: With the help of our God, we can leap over the wall. Perhaps you need to escape from some airless, windowless, dank, disgusting tower. The psalmist says that God will teach you to leap over the walls. God will teach you to climb over and out. God is both walls and escape from walls.

And that's just one psalm.

STEP 3: THE TRIUNE TRUTH

We come now to Step 3: the Trinity. We need to read what Christians before us have said to find images of this three-in-one God. Tertullian wrote that God is the root of the tree of life, the branch of the tree, and the fruit of the tree. Augustine said that God was the Lover, the Beloved, and Love. Catherine of Siena said that God is the table providing our food, God is the food that we eat, and God is the waiter serving us the meal. Julian of Norwich, who lived for decades in a hut attached to an English country church, wrote that God is our Father allmighty, our Mother all-wisdom, and our Lord

all-goodness. In "O Mystery Profound," the Canadian hymn writer Sylvia Dunstan calls God the breather, the breathing, and the breath. In the liturgy for baptism in the ELCA resource *Renewing Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), "the assembly praises God as the source of all life, the word of salvation, and the spirit of mercy" (p. 9). You can find many more. For Christians, God is always three.

In the first place, God is the God beyond. As Genesis 1 suggests, God is outside our universe. God is not merely Mother Earth, for God is not in any way part of our universe. The very word of God makes what it speaks. This is a God who transcends all we know.

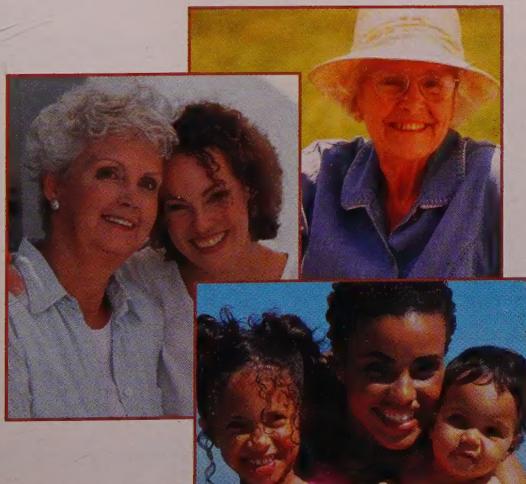
In the second place, God is the God who comes to live with

us. As Genesis 2-3 suggests, God takes a walk in the garden in the early evening. If we were inventing a religion, and if we were to imagine God becoming incarnate, we would probably suggest that God becomes a monarch to institute justice, arrest evildoers, and distribute food to the hungry. Every one of the mighty deeds of the ruler would be carefully noted by the court reporters. In the religion we would invent, God would be the power *on* earth that we believe God is *beyond* earth.

But here is a surprise: The gospel proclaims that God became human as a simple man about whom, in many ways, we know little. (Where did he sleep at night? How did he pay for his food?) All the accounts agree that he was of low social standing, since only the lowest were executed

by crucifixion. It was much better to be a Roman citizen than a poor Jew. Paul, a Roman citizen, got his head chopped off—a far more respectable method of execution. So, just as in Genesis 3 when God looked around for the man and the woman, God-on-earth, whom we call Jesus, looked around for the blind, for the mourners, for the hungry, and called them all to the supper.

In the third place, God continues in this world and in our time, not only outside and back then—God is here and now creating and serving and restoring. God is the power alive in the assembly when we receive from our neighbors the peace of the Lord. God is the forgiveness functioning in our circle when our friends forget our wretched behavior. God is the peace pervading humankind



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when enemies can dine together. God is the new creation promising to bring justice to the oppressed—all those migrant workers without whose labors we would not eat cantaloupe in January. For Christians, it's always three.

SAYING THE MYSTERY

But now we come to a controversial issue. Christians around the world are quarreling over whether the traditional designation for the Three-in-One, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," is itself a golden calf, one that long-ago priests like Aaron designed. Some Christians have stuck this language in a storage room of a museum, while other Christians assert that this language is the only password that opens the door of the church.

The phrase, like all language that tries to describe God, is not literal. That is, God is not a male who impregnated Mary, although some catch themselves thinking that way. So Christian theologians, in the early centuries of the church as well as in our time, have discussed what "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" means, and no matter what we think of this language, and how well or ill it serves us personally, we do well to study what all our ancestors say that the phrase meant. The world has

other religions in which the god or the goddess has a heroic human son. That's not what this phrase means.

We keep trying to probe the mystery of Three-in-One behind the words *Father, Son, and Spirit*. From God came Jesus Christ. But the Word was not merely *with* God: The Word *was* God. The executed man was not other than God. Jesus is God. And, as John 19:30 and 20:22 say, the death and resurrection of Christ released into our world the divine Spirit, so that the Spirit of Christ is still among us.

In a final surprise, theologians teach that the three are co-equal. That is, the transcendent deity and the incarnate Christ and the Spirit are equal. One is not more God than the other two. It's easier to focus on one: a transcendent source of life or an intriguing historic figure or the transformative power in the community. It's difficult to hold them co-equal.

Christians haven't yet agreed on other good ways to say this Mystery. We are always returning to Step 1: that God is Mystery.

Years ago, visiting a museum in Paris, I followed the signs to find my way to the tapestries called "The Lady and the Unicorn." I will never forget how stunned I was, how transfixed I

was by them. You enter a doorway into a round room, and you find yourself encircled by six immense tapestries, each filled with fields of flowers and women wearing spectacular raiment, accompanied by mythical animals. You are embraced by the magical images. You feel tiny next to them, but when you leave the room, you know yourself bigger than you had been before, because in you are now these images.

Christianity asks believers to worship together each week. We sing a psalm, we tell the stories of Jesus, we exchange the Spirit of God with one another. The liturgical tradition of Lutherans provides us with lots of words, each trying to convey the Mystery. May we enjoy each of the steps: the Mystery, the Images, and the Triune Truth.

If there are some words you don't prefer, sing them for your neighbor, your grandmother, or your niece, who love them. And they may be able to sing yours with you.

Gail Ramshaw is the author of many books about liturgical language, including *Treasures Old and New*, *Reviving Sacred Speech*, and *God beyond Gender*. She is professor of religion at La Salle University, Philadelphia, Pa.

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Names of Endearment

by Kirsi Stjerna

"MOMMY, WHAT IF I DIDN'T HAVE A NAME?" MY FOUR-YEAR-OLD ASKED ONE NIGHT. "WHO WOULD TAKE CARE OF ME?" HE SEEMED TO SENSE THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A NAME AND HOW ESSENTIAL IT IS FOR BOTH IDENTITY AND RELATIONSHIP.

The inquiring mind proceeded to wonder: "How do people get names? What if somebody doesn't get a name?" When I assured him that all mommies give their children names, he asked, "And daddies?"

My little egalitarian. He made me think of the stories that the mothers in my family have told of the fathers' involvement in name-giving. My mother has explained many times how it was Dad's idea to name me with my given name—which hardly anybody back home ever uses. She had dreamt of entirely different names for both her daughters; she compromised on mine and had more luck when the time came to name my sister.

My grandmother (who, like my mother, dislikes her own first name) tells a similar story of compromises in naming her four children, all who go by nicknames.

Come to think of it, quite a few people go by nicknames instead of their formal "Christian" names. Could it be that the nicknames fit better and better reflect the personalities and relationships than the name given to a fresh face with a yet unknown personality? Nicknames, in my opinion, speak of endearment and the loving relationship between people who know each other well.

What would be the ideal way to name a baby? Theoretically we could just call the infant Baby until the right name emerged or the child named himself or herself—as the famous skier Picabo Street did.

In Finland, children are named and baptized a couple of months after birth, and the new name is ceremoniously announced at the baptism. Until then, it can remain a secret.

I remember how surprised I was to be asked even by strangers, "So what are you going to name your baby?" as soon as it was apparent that there was a baby in the making. It is sometimes assumed in the United States that a name is chosen for the developing little person before we even know him or her. Just a few hours after delivery, exhausted mothers sign papers that determine their child's name forever.

Those names, of course, have been discussed for weeks. Perhaps they have been argued about and tried out on family and friends. Some have been crossed off the list after strong negative reactions, and many names have been proposed for such weighty reasons as "honoring great-aunt Hildegard."

It would be interesting to know how many name-givers have had second thoughts after arriving at home and getting to know the newest addition to the family.

Personally, I was not entirely ready to name my children so soon after birth. Naming them felt like an enormous responsibility and privilege. I wanted to name them just right, with unique names that would represent their two nationalities and be meaningful to their two very different families. So they got two

names—four, actually, if we count last names. And wouldn't you know: They go mostly by their nicknames. My son got one from my father, and my daughter was named by her little brother. I believe his first word was naming his big sister.

It's a unique ability and privilege we have as humans to name things and beings. There's something godlike in that. In the biblical story of creation, God created man and woman and gave them specific names. Name-giving was part of creation, in a sense. We continue that tradition, that creation, as we name each newborn with a name of his or her own, giving him or her identity. Being named is the beginning of relationships, which started in creation and are affirmed in the act of baptism.

Kristian's question, "What if I didn't have a name?" was more profound than he knew. Yet he has a sense of the importance of the identity, relationships, power, and continuity that come with a name. "I have a name, I am known, I am taken care of by another person whose name I know, thus I am" seemed to be his logic.

To children, naming things is natural. In our house, every doll, action figure, and dinosaur, and of course each guinea pig, has a name. Children have a sense of the significance and permanence of names. They have to be *right*. They are to be respected, and they are very seldom changed.

When our two guinea pigs joined the family, the name-giving proved a significant occasion for deliberation. Our pigs were named Fuzzy and Elsie (though they were sometimes also called Harry Potter and Elsie the Spiderwoman). These decisions came after several possibilities were considered; but the decisions were made firmly. My suggestions for names got little support; they were not *my* pets, after all.

I have seen my children experience the difficulty of looking for the right name as well as the joy of finding the one that feels just right. I have seen them come up with endless new terms of endearment that describe the creatures' personalities and relationships. This bespeaks the love and relationship that each of us has with them.

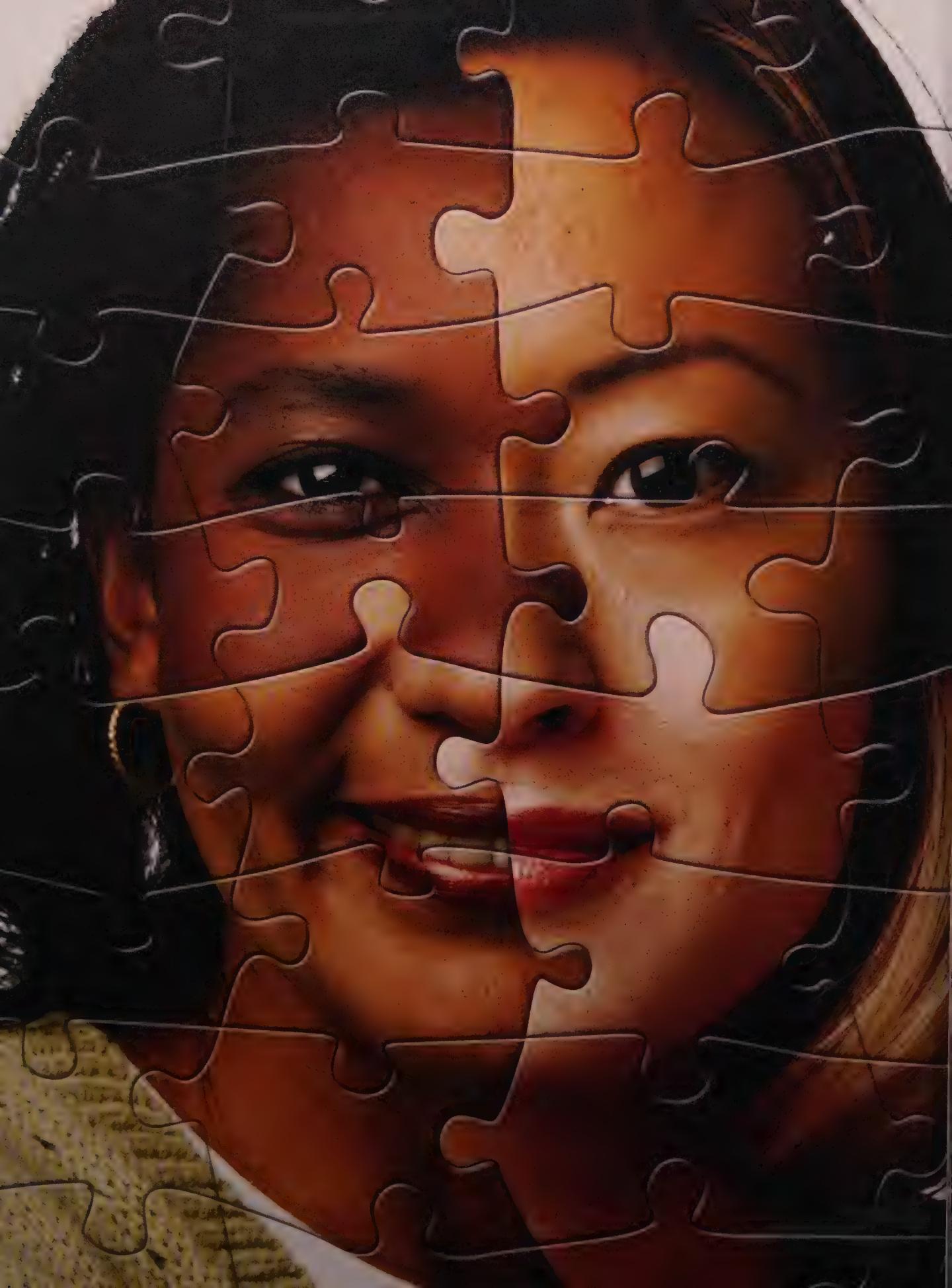
Do we enjoy this same relationship with God, who started the naming process in the first place? Or perhaps

the variety of names we have for God tells of the unique, different relationships we each have with our God, who wants to be known and wants to know us, in person, by name.

Kirsi Stjerna is assistant professor of Reformation church history at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. She is a member of Christ Lutheran Church, Gettysburg, Pa.



It's a unique ability and privilege we have as humans to name things and beings. There's something godlike in that.



A PICTURE PUZZLE

Images of Our Inclusive God

by Lily R. Wu

TELL ME AGAIN ABOUT THE LITTLE BOY, SAMUEL" My nephew Shawn loved to hear this story when he was small. He was fascinated by the image of God calling Samuel—calling a child, by name, and three times at that!—in the middle of the night (1 Samuel 3:1-8). Indeed, what could be more inviting than being wanted?

When someone wants us to come to a party, needs our help with a task, or just wants us around for who we are—not for what we can do—something inside us responds warmly and eagerly. A genuine, no-strings-attached invitation makes us feel special. God created us that way. Human beings are meant to be known and wanted.

As Christians, we know that the almighty God of creation, our eternal God who transcends time and space, our unchanging God of justice and love, wants us!

On this we can agree, and we have heard it again and again: God loves all people and wants us to do the same. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). They will know we are Christians by our love, as the old song goes. Yet barriers still stand between cultures, and consciously or unconsciously, we reinforce them every day. We move in different circles, see the world differently, experience different realities. We wonder, "Perhaps this call to be welcoming is best done by those among us with those special gifts." Lord, please forgive us when we close ourselves off from this call. Help us do better, please!

Let us also be alert for the hidden pitfalls that the word *inclusivity* may suggest. It may sound as though we are merely seeking to "include" outsiders (specifically people of color) in our faith and in the programs already in place. That puts us in the driver's seat and expects the outsider to behave like a proper passenger. Or, as one pastor said, "I feel that we [Christians of different races and ethnicities] are in separate cars, driving in the same direction, toward God. But I am concerned that if we get too close, we will damage each other."

I would like to offer a different perspective. Imagine that we are all God's guests en route to our host's banquet. What a thrill to have been invited! We are laughing, sharing, getting acquainted. We are taking turns riding or driving in the different cars. Why not give the drivers a break? Why not take turns reading the maps? Practicing inclusivity is a journey toward wholeness. It is a way of being that brings people into harmony by valuing them, sharing power and resources equitably, and, in essence, treating each other in ways that would make God proud of us.

In a perfect world, all people would have equal access to opportunities. But in a broken world like ours, God is ready to fill us with the power to work toward setting things right; all we have to do is ask. None of us has all the answers. We may take the lead sometimes and step back at other times (see 2 Corinthians 8:12-15).

We are putting a huge puzzle together. When we finish, we will see God in our unity. So when you come to the table with your puzzle piece (yourself, your insights,

your concerns) and I come with mine, God uses us so that we can better see the big picture. This is, after all, a challenging puzzle, one that doesn't come with a picture on the cover to match our pieces against. As we fit different pieces together, we'll enjoy conversations along the way. We will certainly discuss what our inclusive, welcoming, transforming God looks like. Here are a few of the "puzzle pieces" I'm bringing to the table today.

GOD BY NATURE IS INCLUSIVE—JUST LOOK THROUGH THE BIBLE!

Ruth, a "foreigner," is an honored model of loyalty. The "birthday" of the church in Acts 2 takes place amid a decidedly multicultural crowd. In Acts 8:26–39, Philip baptizes an Ethiopian official. Jesus spends a lot of time with people of different backgrounds, of different ages and both sexes, and from various walks of life. He is caring, especially to people who are sick and burdened. Healing and teaching are important to him. He listens. He talks to and befriends women.

CHRISTIANS ARE MEANT TO BE INCLUSIVE

One way of interpreting the cross as a symbol is to see the vertical bar as representing God's relationship to us, and the horizontal one as representing our relationship to others. Without one or the other, how can the sign of Jesus appear? Lutherans especially cherish the gift of grace. Since grace cannot be earned, how could we possibly think we can "raise the bar" for others and expect them to jump over it in order to be accepted?

GOD TRANSCENDS RACE AND ETHNICITY

I raved one Easter to my friend José about a new clay animation video on the life of Jesus, *The Miracle Maker*. "They had British accents, though. Isn't that strange?" he said. "I guess British accents are the most acceptable to Americans. How I wish for the day when a Mexican accent would be accepted just as much!" I'm glad José

reminded me. How many of us most easily imagine God as white?

I fondly recall a painting I saw as a child, an image of a Chinese Jesus surrounded by children. It was special, and it brought me closer to Jesus. Let us all be vigilant, however, not to slip into the trap of making God in our own image. If we do, we—rather than God—become our own guiding light, and we will be blind to God's real will for us. We must also guard against the idea that we are the only ones made in our Lord's image. The truth is that everyone was created in God's image (Genesis 1:26).

Multiculturalism and inclusivity are not concerns only for people of color! Let us ask God to direct us all in becoming as welcoming as possible—as a church and as individuals. My friend Bea, a Hmong Lutheran pastor in St. Paul, Minnesota, once remarked, "I feel so heartened when I meet people who want to be more multicultural, know more about racial justice, and be part of making it happen."

THE MORE WE SEEK TO LOVE GOD AND OTHERS, THE MORE WE WILL KNOW ABOUT INCLUSIVITY

When my nephew was young, he once delighted me by looking at himself in a full-length mirror, spreading his arms wide, and gleefully declaring, "I'm perfect!" As adults we may look in a mirror and realize we can see God's image only dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12). That's why we need a caring community of faith filled with friends of different backgrounds. These friends are the mirrors that reflect back what we need to know. Friends like these show an image of our God who is patient, loving, and kind. They can also tell us the truth with love.

OUR PURPOSE IS TRANSFORMATION

God both calls and empowers us to reach out across cultures so that we can transform the world together.

continued on page 33



WHAT TOPS YOUR PRAYER LIST?

The Metro New York Synod of the ELCA and the Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod top my prayer list. Although I have lived in New Hampshire for the past two years, a part of me remains in New York, where I was born and raised. After September 11, my thoughts and prayers were focused on family, friends, and others I never met personally. The synod and district are working tirelessly to "comfort and renew" the spirits of those devastated by the tragedy. Prayer will play an integral part in the healing process.

Jeanne Philbrick—New Castle, N.H.

My nephew Scott enlisted in the Army just after the new year and is currently in basic training in Missouri. In this time of threatening war and political posturing, I am praying not only for him and the other young men and women in our military but also for the young men and women they may face in combat—all of them drawn into a war beyond their control. I pray that our leaders can live up to the principles they espouse and that the leaders of other nations do likewise. Everyone says they want peace. So why can't we have it?

Karen Ball—Oakland, Calif.

God blessed me with the gift of children and a loving family. I pray for God's support and guidance to nurture that gift as I parent my children and carry out the task of being sister, daughter, niece, wife, mother, mother-in-law, and grandma. I pray for

God's support and guidance for my young adult children, even though they may not ask for themselves. I pray for God's support and comfort for my aging mother and aunt as they adjust to the limitations that being in their mid-to-late eighties brings. I pray for patience and acceptance when my children make tough decisions. I pray for comfort for family members and myself as we face life's sorrows together.

Diane Palmer—North Bend, Ore.

I pray for needs, problems, and concerns—for healing, for comfort of those who have suffered the death of a loved one. I pray for teachers, nurses, doctors, ministers, social workers, lawyers, government, state, and local leaders, marriages, pregnant couples, and all who travel.

Barbara Palasek—Shreveport, La.

Every morning I ask God to give me patience and to help me refrain from making judgments. I ask God for help in guiding my speech, so that I can speak words of encouragement and kindness instead of anger.

Ruth Keller—Ann Arbor, Mich.

In our prayers for 2003 I would like to encourage Christians to support the missionaries who have answered God's call. These evangelists risk their lives to reach people who have not yet had the opportunity to hear the good news. Pray for them to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to be encouraged, to be protected, and to stand firm in God's will.

Lisa Zaloudek—Bellevue, Nebr.

God in My World

by Gayle Aldrich

I WISH I COULD SAY MY FAITH HAS ALWAYS BEEN STRONG, BUT THAT'S NOT TRUE. I HAVE HAD TIMES OF DOUBT: IS THERE REALLY A GOD? IF SO, WHAT IS GOD'S ROLE IN MY LIFE? WHO IS GOD?

When I was a child, knowing God was easy: God just was. But as I grew older, learning how to judge and make choices, I found myself wondering more and questioning the faith I had always taken for granted. I had a billion questions, and I wanted answers. Eventually, I asked God to help my unbelief.

I began to see God in my mentally disabled uncle as he shared his innocence and caring with the world that surrounded him. I saw God as a huge warm embrace wrapped around me when I felt lost and forlorn in my own environment. I saw God in the unwed teenage mothers who lived with our family when I was in elementary school. I saw God through my mother's love, not only for me but for them.

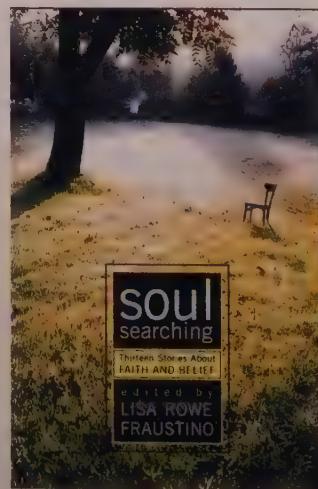
Looking back, having pregnant teens live with our family was a little unusual in the 1960s and 1970s. But Mom believed that everyone deserved to be loved, and these girls—pregnant, young, alone, and insecure—had been kicked out of the homes they were born into.

Mom was the junior choir director at church, and one of the girls in particular loved to come along and help her with the kids. Mom was glad she showed an interest in the church community and welcomed her. Others did not see it the same way. “What sort of influence would this be on our

daughters?” “What is she doing here?” And so went the murmur as Mom followed through with her call to witness for God as a young stay-at-home mother of three small daughters, mentoring even younger moms-to-be.

Have you ever not seen God standing right in front of you? Or refused to? I believe people come into our lives on purpose, if we allow them to, so that we are constantly challenged to see God in new ways.

As your book group gathers, or as you do your own reading this summer, consider learning more about the different ways people see God and the different ways you might challenge yourself to see God. This month's main selection is a book for young readers. It might be a wonderful gift for a young person in your life. New confirmands and those entering high school will particularly enjoy the short stories in this book.



*Soul Searching:
Thirteen Stories about
Faith and Belief
edited by Lisa Rowe
Fraustino (Simon and
Schuster, 2002)*

In this collection of 13 stirring stories, various authors illuminate the world's major religions—Judaism, Christianity,

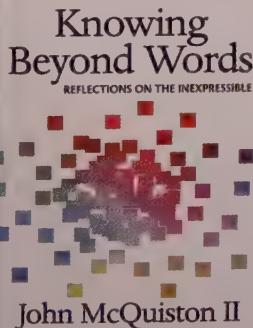
Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism—through a wide range of faith experiences. Each short story ponders the life experience of a person who comes to believe in a new way.

Each story has a different adolescent protagonist facing a life-altering crisis that triggers a re-evaluation of the way he or she believes. Through their own insights and those of the people around them, they come to find a new promise for life.

The first story is about a 17-year-old Amish girl who is shunned because she is pregnant. She is sent to a home for unwed mothers, gives birth, and makes the decision to return to her family, for a while at least; even though she knows she and the baby will be shunned. You see the impact of the outside world on her sheltered life—the first time she sees her reflection in a mirror, experiences hot and cold running water, and so on—and how she makes her own journey to a stronger, more personal faith. At the end of the story, the author shares a few words about how this story came to be: It was the experience of the author's husband's grandmother.

As you search for meaning and purpose in life, ask yourself: How do I see God in my day? When was the last time I saw God in myself? What new ways can I think of to find God in my world? Are there ways I can show God to others?

Further Reading



Knowing beyond Words: Reflections on the Inexpressible, by John McQuiston II (Morehouse Publishing, 2002). This book brings together the thought-provoking words of men and women who have tried to

express the spirit of the inexpressible. Using the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* as a starting point,

McQuiston brings us the inspiring words of people from many centuries and religious traditions, including Teresa of Avila, T. S. Eliot, H. Richard Niebuhr, David Cooper, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Confucius, Thomas Merton, John Shelby Spong, Annie Dillard, Krishnamurti, the Dalai Lama, Francis of Assisi, Karl Rahner, Shakespeare, and many more.



Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love, by Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt (Paraclete Press, 2002). Our culture is increasingly suspicious and hostile toward anyone who appears to be different—especially when tragedy strikes. *Radical Hospitality* is a quietly dazzling book, overflowing with small stories, teaching by illustration how to live the Benedictine Rule.



Unceasing Prayer: A Beginner's Guide, by Debra Farrington (Paraclete Press, 2002). In the Bible, Paul challenges Christians to "pray unceasingly." Whether you already pray regularly or are just beginning to consider doing so, this book offers a collection of gentle, simple, and comforting prayers, gathered from an array of treasured Scripture passages, that will help you find God everywhere and always, touching every sort of human need.

Gayle Aldrich, a writer in Minneapolis, has been an advocate, actress, musician, editor, publicist, and yoga instructor.



HOW DO YOU INCORPORATE MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND TRADITIONS IN YOUR CONGREGATION? SHARE WITH US YOUR EFFORTS TO BE WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE TO ALL MEMBERS OF YOUR COMMUNITY.

I heard about a Lutheran, Ernest, who like me had participated in the Metropolitan New York Synod's diaconia program of education and spiritual formation. Ernest is serving a 25-years-to-life sentence for murder. He staunchly affirms his innocence. While still in prison, he continues to "bloom where he is planted." He ministers to other inmates who may be new to Christianity. He has become a mentor and Bible study leader, bringing many to better understanding of Christ's message. Even while in prison, he finds ways to serve the Lord.

I now send copies of sermons, Scripture inserts, and assorted devotions and meditations to 24 prisoners. In a monthly newsletter, I include prayers, articles on faith, spiritual support, and even some humor. These efforts help the recipients feel they are part of the body of Christ and bring the reality of Easter to them.

Kathy Rock—Ardsley, N.Y.

The Ruth Circle of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Beaumont, Texas, acknowledges Lent each year by giving to the Heifer Project International. This organization sends farm animals to countries that need them, and through its literature we are educated about the conditions in these countries and the ways that the animals generate income for poor families. (One of our members was able to witness the excitement firsthand as a goat was delivered to Africa.)

I make a calendar with all the days of Lent. For each day there is a Bible verse to read and think about,

plus a specified amount of money for the project. For example: "Serve the Lord with reverent fear; rejoice with trembling" (Psalm 2:11). Give 5 cents for each candle in your home." At the conclusion of Lent, our money is sent to Heifer Project International.

Mary Winchester—Beaumont, Tex.

Light of Christ Lutheran Church was formed through the consolidation of several area churches. During this process, it was agreed that our ministry would celebrate the rich diversity of our Chicago neighborhood. To this end, we have developed the Common Grounds Interfaith Center.

The center is destined to become a gathering place for people of all faiths as it welcomes guests into fellowship through the use of its three areas: a coffee shop (a place for conversation); a bookstore (where participating faith groups offer printed resources representing our diversity); and a cyber area (with computers and tutorials to develop skills and promote communication among families and friends).

The center's program fosters interfaith understanding through regular dialogue groups and occasional special events. Entertainment events provide a venue for joyful participation for all ages.

Called by Christ to witness to the world, we believe that the interfaith center will provide a physical space in which all of God's children may gather in a nonthreatening environment. We ask for prayers of encouragement as the center opens this spring!

Darlene King—Chicago, Ill.

Memorable Stories of Families and Faith

How Long Do You Wait to Love Again?

She is a widowed mother working as a Harvey Girl, and nothing can prepare Ashley for the emotions the handsome young architect causes in her. Will her world ever be predictable again?

Across the Years
by Tracie Peterson

It's Never Too Late For Healing

Her father's death forces Macy back home. Then her mother's desperate finances and an intriguing neighbor keep her in town longer than she expected. As she searches for healing, she's soon reminded of why she left so many years ago.

Troubled Waters
by Rene Gutteridge



Dreams Becoming Reality

His dream of being a journalist is about to come true. Then Blessing is hit by an epidemic following a terrible flood, and Thorliff must return home. Will he ever reach his goal?

More Than a Dream
by Lauraine Snelling

Uncover Hope in Reconciliation

When their ailing father confesses a long-held secret, his grown children face the trauma of rethinking their family history and reexamining the future. Will their family ties prove stronger than the challenges they face?

At Close of Day
by Joseph Bentz

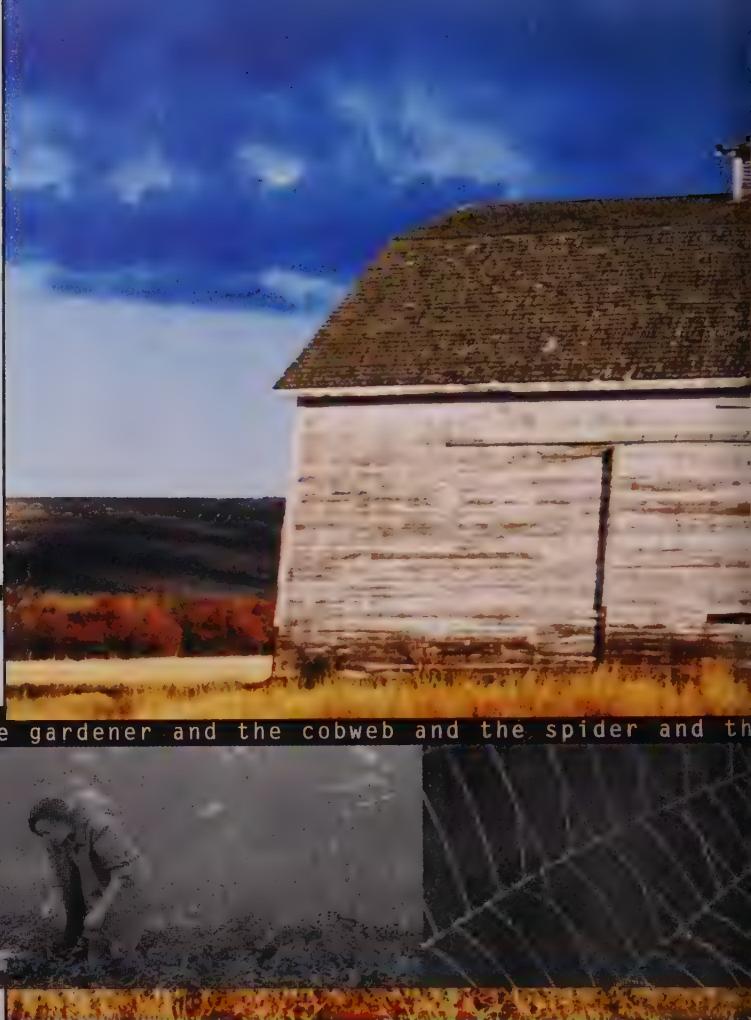
 **BETHANYHOUSE**

11400 Hampshire Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Available at your local bookstore.

WHO IS LIKE GOD?

by Lorraine S. Brugh



When the psalmist asked, "Who is like the Lord our God?" (Psalm 113:5), he (probably not she) was thinking of the qualities that would allow one to approximate the divine. For the psalmist this was a rhetorical question; the psalmist would not have expected that any human being could be like God. We might look at the question further, though, to consider

WHAT WOULD MAKE US THINK THAT SOMEONE OR SOMETHING IS LIKE GOD.

How do we recognize God? How do we know when something or someone is like God?



We Christians in the twenty-first century do not find it as difficult as the psalmist did to attribute God-like characteristics to humans. We have the benefit of knowing God in human form, Jesus. So when we are asked, "Who is like God?" we can at least point to Jesus. Jesus was a healer, teacher, and companion, among other things, so we know that these are all parts of God's nature.

We yearn to catch a glimpse of divinity around us, in our everyday life. Many of us are uncertain about what to look for as we search for evidence of God among us

here and now. Contemporary Christians are not the only ones who have been perplexed by this challenge. Even after the resurrection, the disciples had trouble recognizing Jesus, God's own, still among them.

In this issue's Bible study text, John 20, we see the disciples after the resurrection, trying to make sense of the God who had raised Jesus from the dead. How could they not recognize Jesus? Wouldn't they have known Jesus at first glance? How could Mary not have recognized Jesus at the tomb, and Thomas not have

believed until he had put his hand in Jesus' wounds? Even with God standing right before them, saying, "Look, it is I," they could not recognize God among them.

We have an amazing ability to miss the divine presence even when it is right in front of our faces. How often have we experienced a moment of grace and only later realized that God was clearly present there? How many times has a friend spoken the needed word or given the needed touch, and only later have we realized that God was present in that person and her actions?

Perhaps recognizing God's presence is difficult for us partly because of our mental images of God. Many common biblical images and metaphors for God represent God's otherness, the ways God is different from us. Nouns like *rock* and *fortress*, adjectives like *all-powerful* and *all-knowing* come to mind. These show in sharp relief how different God is from us. We know all too well that we are far from being powerful or all-knowing. We

Sunday school books; we remember how our childhood pastor described God. For many women, our religious and spiritual traditions are connected to our family and its traditions. Those connections run deep. Expanding beyond familiar traditions, adding new and different words and images of God to our prayer, can feel artificial and uncomfortable, if not unsettling and frightening. As much as we may sense the confinement of our

Other, but also Like: God is patient, compassionate, loving, humble. These qualities are often ordinary and undramatic. In fact, we probably possess them ourselves to some degree, which may explain why we overlook them. We expect that if we encountered God, we would experience God to be amazing and overwhelming, not familiar and comfortable.

Women are culturally trained to accept themselves in secondary

have heard these words for God all our lives, and that's what we expect of God. We don't expect God to be very much like us.

For women, many traditional metaphors for the divine—king, prince, lord, master, father, shepherd—carry another layer of otherness. All these represent God in masculine ways. The Bible contains feminine images of the divine, such as the portrayal of wisdom as Sophia in the book of Proverbs, but these are seldom proclaimed or preached in churches. We women rarely hear God likened to ourselves, and so we don't expect to find divinity within ourselves.

To complicate things a bit further, we may find aspects of these traditional metaphors for God comforting. We grew up with them; we remember the art in our

spiritual past, we also may feel its solid foundation, and that can be a great comfort in a changing world.

Our foundation of tradition is probably also the basis of our place in our families, both our family of origin and our current family. Examples of the traditional women's roles of nurturing, supporting, and assisting can all be found reflected in Scripture. In going beyond these, we may feel that we are leaving the security they had given us in our faith. If we begin to ask why traditional women's roles like these are not raised up as reflections of the divine, we may begin to wonder what else has been left out.

But once we do begin to explore other images and metaphors for God, we are often startled to find that God is not only

roles. Many of us are satisfied with assisting another or working supportively with a supervisor. Such roles reinforce one's self-image as a person who plays a subordinate role to someone in a primary role: national security advisor to the president, surgical nurse to the surgeon, law clerk to the judge. Our tradition has given us a picture of God that reflects these primary roles: king, commander, judge. We must make a mental shift to see the divine reflected in the subordinate roles that we women have been brought up to see as ours.

But when we begin to look for reflections of God in our roles and in ourselves, we find a whole array to sort out. Could it be that aspects of ourselves are like God? And if so, which ones? Is it the part of us that nurtures, or is it the part that

dreams of previously unimagined possibilities? Is it the part of us that enjoys teaching, or is it the part of us that seeks companionship? Are these aspects mutually exclusive, or are they parts of a whole, like facets of a gem?

Many of the facets of ourselves might be seen as reflecting the divine. But do they seem lacking, a little too ordinary, a little too undramatic to be signs of what God is like?

We have an amazing ability to miss the divine presence even when it is right in front of our faces.

This idea—that signs of God's presence are necessarily dramatic—is not without warrant. Turn on the television news almost any night of the week, and you can surely find human angels directly altering the course of any number of lives. Courageous rescue workers snatch people from certain death in a mining accident. Billionaires donate huge sums to find cures for dread diseases. Dedicated teachers lead their unlikely students to understand the intricacies of higher math. The effects are dramatic, the solutions miraculous, and people are transformed.

Would we expect anything less of a sign of God's presence? No, we wouldn't. We often think that if there is no clearly observable evidence of God's presence, then it probably wasn't really God at all.

Many live in hope of being given a sign of God's presence. Many remain disappointed. Are we misled in our expectations of the divine?

Well, perhaps we are. Perhaps the reason Mary didn't recognize Jesus at the tomb was that he looked like an ordinary gardener, doing the ordinary things gardeners do. He wasn't performing miracles or shining with dazzling light as were the angels she had just seen;

maybe he was just watering the flowers. She certainly wouldn't have expected her risen Lord to be so ordinary. Perhaps Jesus' disguise was his ordinary humanness.

Most of us feel pretty ordinary most of the time. It is no surprise that we have trouble seeing the divine in the ordinary. It seems so undramatic, so much less than we would expect for a divine encounter. The risen Lord who has conquered death appearing as a mere gardener, with dirt under his nails? What an anticlimax! If he'd shown up with choirs of angels and rays of glory, Mary would have known what was going on.

But what if our primary images and metaphors for God were some of the ordinary ones we find in the Gospel parables, the stories Jesus himself told? The woman mixing

yeast into the flour to make bread, the mother hen gathering her young under her wings, bridesmaids waiting for the groom to arrive, the woman looking for a lost coin. These are images of God, too. Jesus shows us images of God in the ordinary events of ordinary life. And these images are like us, as we go about our rounds of cooking, caring for our children, helping other people celebrate, managing our money.

Genesis reminds us that we are created in God's image. "In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). God has imprinted God's own image on us, in all our ordinary fallen humanness. So we, you and I, are like God: a baker and a rock, a mother and a king, a gardener and a vine, a housekeeper and a fortress. All these metaphors and images—feminine, masculine, human, animal, vegetable, mineral—are able to reflect God's image. God is like all these things, and God is far, far more than any one of them.

Because God's image was imprinted on us at our creation and the sign of the cross was imprinted on us at our baptism, clearly, we are meant to bear God's image, to bear God's likeness, to be like God. We don't have to do anything more. It

continued on page 37

Session 9

“I have seen the Lord!”



by Mary Hinkle

Study Text

John 20:1–18, 24–31

Theme Verse

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30–31)

Overview

The last two chapters of John’s Gospel tell the story of the empty tomb and Jesus’ several appearances to his followers. In this session, we read some of these stories and reflect on how Jesus’ first followers came to believe in the reality of his resurrection. We will also share with one another how we, too, have been witnesses to the power of Christ’s resurrection.

Opening

Christians have many different hymns and prayers that celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Open your session by praying this prayer or another one related to the theme of resurrection.

Almighty God, you give us the joy of celebrating our Lord’s resurrection. Give us also the joys of life in your service, and bring us at last to the full joy of life

eternal; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

(Lutheran Book of Worship, 21, prayer for Easter evening)

An Empty Tomb

1. **Read John 20:1–2. When Mary finds the tomb empty, what does she conclude?**

After finding the tomb empty, Mary finds Peter and another disciple, known only as “the one whom Jesus loved” (see sidebar, page 28). When the two disciples hear Mary’s report, they race to the tomb to see what has happened. The beloved disciple outruns Peter, but when Peter arrives, he goes into the tomb first.

2. **Read John 20:3–10. John describes the scene inside the tomb in some detail. What do the disciples find inside? What is their reaction to what they see?**

Go Deeper

In the stories at the end of the Gospels, the disciples do not generally come to faith at the instant they hear news of Jesus’ resurrection. Either they do not believe the reports they hear, or they believe but are puzzled by them.

For another example of skeptical reactions to the news of the resurrection, read Luke 24:1–12. What do you think of the disciples' reactions? Choose one of the following, or compose your own:

- a. It's comforting that even the disciples had trouble believing at first. When I have trouble believing, at least I know I am in good company.
- b. It's annoying that the disciples thought the women were telling "an idle tale." Would the disciples have thought that if the witnesses had been men?
- c. It's surprising that the disciples did not understand right away. Didn't Jesus tell them he would rise from the dead?

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

Read John 20:11–18. After Peter and the beloved disciple return home, Mary Magdalene stays near the tomb. She is weeping, as Jesus had wept outside the tomb of his friend Lazarus (see John 11:35). Looking inside the tomb, Mary encounters angels, but she still thinks only that someone has taken Jesus' body away. Next, Jesus himself asks her the question that the angels had asked her: "Why are you weeping?" She does not recognize him at first, and she asks him, too, to help her find the body of Jesus.

3. How does Jesus break through Mary's grief and confusion and make himself known to her (compare John 20:16 and John 10:3)? After her conversation with Jesus, what does Mary do?

Go Deeper

One of the early scenes of Jesus' ministry resembles the scene between Jesus and Mary outside the tomb. Read John 1:35–41. Here is a list of similarities. Do you draw any conclusions from the fact that these stories repeat certain words and themes?

John 1:35–41	John 20:15–18
Jesus says to those following him, "What are you looking for?"	Jesus says to Mary, "Whom are you looking for?"
The ones following Jesus call him "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher)."	When Mary recognizes Jesus, she calls him, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher)."
After encountering Jesus, Andrew tells Peter, "We have found the Messiah."	After encountering Jesus, Mary tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

Jesus Appears to Thomas

After Jesus has made himself known to Mary, he appears to a group of the disciples. These disciples are not out in the open, at the tomb, but are instead hidden away for fear of those Jewish leaders who had plotted against Jesus. Jesus comes and stands among them and says to them, "Peace be with you" (see John 20:19–23). Unfortunately, one of the disciples, Thomas, is not present during this appearance of Jesus. When Thomas hears the testimony of the others, he will not believe it.

4. Read John 20:24–25. What do you think of the response Thomas has to the witness of the others?

- a. Thomas is the type who keeps his feet on the ground, and what the disciples report sounds unbelievable. I would probably react the same way.
- b. Thomas speaks so vividly of Jesus' wounds. I can tell he wouldn't sugarcoat the pain and unfairness of life.
- c. It seems as if Thomas was asking for special favors. I don't know why he couldn't just believe the disciples.

d. Thomas asks for what he needs to believe. I admire his directness.

Read John 20:26–29. A week after Jesus first appears to the disciples, he appears again. This time he addresses Thomas directly. Jesus asks Thomas to touch his wounds and confirm that he is real and alive, not a ghost or a vision. He also says to Thomas, “Do not doubt but believe” (John 20:27).

Jesus' actions toward Thomas are similar to his interactions with the other disciples in his previous appearance to them. For example, in

WHO'S WHO

Through the eyes of Mary Magdalene, Peter, “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” and Thomas, John tells us the story of the empty tomb and of appearances of the risen Jesus to his followers. Each of these characters has appeared before in the Gospel.

Peter

In John 1, Andrew finds his brother Simon Peter and tells him, “We have found the Messiah.” Peter and Andrew are among Jesus’ first followers. Sometimes Peter speaks for the whole group of disciples, as in John 6:68. At other times, Peter seems to speak or act only for himself, and then in quite impulsive ways. It is Peter who at first vehemently refuses to

allow Jesus to wash his feet (John 13:6–9) and Peter who draws a sword to cut off the ear of the high priest’s slave during Jesus’ arrest (John 18:10–11). A short time later, Peter denies knowing Jesus at all (John 18:15–27).

Peter and the beloved disciple appear together in several scenes in the Gospel. Both are in the scene where Jesus identifies Judas as his

betrayer (John 13:21–26). Both race to the tomb after Mary Magdalene reports that it is empty (John 20:1–10), and both interact with the risen Jesus during his appearance to his disciples by the sea of Galilee (John 21:7, 20–23). In fact, the only appearance in the Gospel of the beloved disciple without Peter occurs at the foot of the cross (John 19:26–27).

The Beloved Disciple

Only in John’s Gospel is anyone referred to as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” The disciple, who is never named, makes his first appearance at the Last Supper and then is

possibly present at the trial (the “other disciple” in John 18:15–16), and certainly present at the crucifixion, at the empty tomb, and when Jesus appears to his disciples in Galilee.

Although the beloved disciple has sometimes been identified as John, the son of Zebedee, and has sometimes been thought to be the writer of the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel itself never makes this identification. Furthermore, as New Testament scholar Brendan Byrne points out, “That an early Christian leader would write himself into the Gospel under such a pretentious title as ‘beloved disciple’ is scarcely

both scenes, Jesus displays his hands and his side (see John 20:20). It is interesting that the risen body of Jesus still bears the wounds of the crucifixion. Christian artists through the centuries have honored this part of the Gospel witness, always representing the wounds of crucifixion in their portraits of the resurrected Lord. In this way, artists remind us that the resurrection does not deny the reality of suffering and death. The resurrection is not the denial of death, but its defeat. Death no longer has dominion over Jesus, or over those who "have life in his name" (John 20:31). Yet even in his

resurrected body, Jesus carries the marks of both his faithfulness to God and his willingness to lay down his life for his friends.

5. **Do you think Jesus was angry with Thomas or disappointed that Thomas needed to see Jesus to believe? Why or why not?**

Getting What We Need to Believe

Read John 20:30–31. After Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," the narrator of the Gospel addresses readers directly on the question of believing

to be imagined. It is far more likely that the community, which revered him as founder and guide, conferred the epithet upon him (perhaps posthumously) and that in due course their representative . . . wrote him into the Gospel.¹ In other words, the community that produced the Fourth Gospel had a special relationship with one of the disciples, and as they told the story of Jesus, they referred to the disciple whom they knew and loved as Jesus' "beloved disciple."

Mary Magdalene

In all the Gospels, women are the first witnesses to

the resurrection of Jesus. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, a group of women go together to the tomb. In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene makes her way to the tomb alone. In addition to her role in the resurrection stories, Mary's only other appearance in the Fourth Gospel is at the crucifixion, where she stands near the cross with the mother of Jesus, the beloved disciple, and Mary the wife of Clopas (John 19:25).

Luke and Mark list Mary Magdalene among the women of Galilee who provided for Jesus and his

disciples out of their resources and who followed him to Jerusalem and, finally, to the cross (Luke 8:1–3; Mark 15:40–41). Luke also says that seven demons had been cast out of Mary (Luke 8:2).

Thomas

Thomas's name is included in all the lists of the 12 disciples (Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15; see also the list of 11 in Acts 1:13), though he has a speaking part only in the Gospel of John. In the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, Thomas responds to Jesus' decision to return to Judea after having

escaped an attempted stoning (John 11:16), and when Jesus says to the disciples that they know the way where he is going, Thomas says forthrightly, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" This question leads to Jesus' proclamation, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:5–6). While we sometimes hear this disciple referred to as "doubting Thomas," he does not receive this description anywhere in the New Testament.

in Jesus. The last two verses of John 20 give us a window on the purpose of the Gospel as a whole. The author hopes that the written word of the Gospel will have the same effect that Jesus' spoken word and his appearance before Mary Magdalene and the other disciples had upon them.

6. Some people think it would be easier to believe in Jesus if they had been among the first disciples and had had their own eyewitness experience of his resurrection. Other people think it is easier for later generations to believe because we have the Scripture and the testimony of so many who have believed and sought to follow Jesus through the centuries. If you could be either

a first-century Christian or a twenty-first-century Christian, which would you choose? Why?

7. Think back over our study of the Gospel of John this year. Together, we have seen Jesus reveal God's glory as he

- turned water into wine at a wedding feast
- taught Nicodemus about God's great love for the world
- gave sight to a man born blind
- became flesh and lived among us
- spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd
- raised Lazarus from the dead
- welcomed the disciples "home" by washing their feet

NOTES ON TRANSLATIONS

At three places in the biblical texts for this session, translation questions arise.

John 20:17

New Revised Standard Version	King James Version
"Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"	Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

The question is whether Jesus is saying to Mary, "Do not hold onto me" (NRSV and NIV) or "Do not touch me" (KJV). The KJV translation has sometimes led readers to believe that there was some prohibition against touching Jesus' resurrected body. Yet this is apparently not the case since Jesus actually *invites* Thomas to touch his hands and his side so that Thomas can confirm that Jesus is really standing there and that the one standing there is the same one who has undergone crucifixion (John 20:27). For this and other reasons, some conclude that the KJV seems to have missed the point of Jesus' language. His command to Mary is more like "Do not cling to me" (NKJV) or "Do not hold onto me" (NRSV) than it is a prohibition against touch. The text is not saying that Mary cannot embrace her teacher and Lord; it is saying that after embracing Jesus, she needs to let go of him because they both have places to go! Jesus must go to the Father, and Mary must go to the disciples to announce what Jesus has told her.

- was tried and crucified as “King of the Jews”
- rose from the dead and appeared to his followers.

Do you have a favorite story from this Gospel? How has that story contributed to your faith? That is, how has the story or passage from the Gospel helped you “believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,” and, believing, to

“have life in his name” (John 20:31)?

Closing

Jesus said to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me?” Sometimes we can “see” the risen Jesus working through the words and actions of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

If you are participating in this study with a group, think about how and when you have

John 20:27

New Revised Standard Version	New International Version	New King James Version
Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”	Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”	Then He said to Thomas, “Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.”
Both the NRSV and the NIV translate the word for “unbelieving” in John 20:27 as “doubt.” However, Jesus does not say that Thomas is doubting, as if a part of Thomas believed but still he felt some nagging questions about what he believed. Thomas is not halfway to belief before		Jesus’ appearance. Instead, Thomas simply does not believe the reports he has heard. He has said that if he does not see and touch Jesus, he “will not believe” (John 20:25). The NKJV rightly catches the contrast of verse 27. “Do not be unbelieving,” Jesus says. Rather, “be believing.”

John 20:29

New Revised Standard Version	New International Version	
Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”	“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”	The NRSV puts Jesus’ response to Thomas in the form of a question. The NIV makes the same sentence into a statement. Either translation of the Greek text is possible. In either case, Jesus is commenting on how Thomas has come to faith and contrasting Thomas’s way to faith with the experience of others who will not get the chance to see their risen Lord, but who—based on the witness of others—believe in him nonetheless. The emphasis of the verse is on the second half of Jesus’ statement: Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

seen group members bearing witness to Jesus' victory over death. If you are comfortable doing so, offer a public word of thanks to one other participant for the way she has shown you an element of Jesus' resurrected glory.

Say a prayer of thanksgiving for all the ways that Jesus continues to make himself known so that people may believe and have life in his name. Close with the first and fifth verses of the hymn "For All the Faithful Women" (*With One Voice*, 692).

For all the faithful women who served in days of old, / to you shall thanks be given; to all,

their story told. / They served with strength and gladness in tasks your wisdom gave. / To you their lives bore witness, proclaimed your power to save.

We praise the other Mary who came at Easter dawn / and near the tomb did tarry, but found her Lord was gone. / As joyfully she saw him in resurrection light, / may we by faith behold him, the day who ends all night.

Note

1. Brendan Byrne, "Beloved Disciple," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:660.

this month's **QUESTION**

Go to www.elca.org/wo/lwt to enter your response. (Results will appear in the October 2003 issue.)

How do you tell the people in your life that you thank God for them?

- A. I tell them face to face.
- B. I write my thanks in a card, note, or letter.
- C. I give them small symbolic gifts.
- D. I don't say anything to them directly, but I express my thanks to God in prayer.
- E. A combination of A, B, or C.

Results from Question of the Month

(December 2002)

Q: Which of the following best completes this phrase for you:

When I converse with God in prayer, I often imagine God to be ...

Here's what you said:

A. comforting, like a parent	52.3%
B. welcoming, like a gracious host	21.0%
C. wise, like a teacher	21.1%
D. stern, like a judge	2.2%
E. regal, like a king	3.4%

It's too big a job to do by ourselves. We need each other. In our diverse world, having a diverse community to call home is authentic, effective, and essential for preventing conflict and promoting peace.

Christians are meant to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). We are meant to love. "The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (1 John 4:21).

GOD'S IDEAS ABOUT IMAGE ARE DIFFERENT FROM SOCIETY'S

Our society is big on image. We learn to create a positive visual impression; we wear our best suit for a job interview. We feel a lift in our spirits when we can have newness in the form of a new hairstyle or makeover for our home.

But we cannot see and honor God's image if we simply accept or endorse societal images of people. In the United States, the prevailing standards of beauty, color, class, race, ethnicity, and acceptability favor those who are white and middle-class. And that paradigm leaves many people out. At its worst, it leads to racial hate and violence. What a difference it would make if more people—especially those involved in churches—would support antiracist and multicultural ministries! They would reveal to the world more clearly the image of a God of justice.

Indeed, learning to build relationships across cultures and speaking up for racial justice are the kinds of makeovers that most please God. Our very spirits, our inner beings, are changed as we learn how to foster such growth (Romans 12:2).

Sometimes we'll make mistakes, because we are learning. For example, four-year-old Michael in Seattle heard his mother say she would drop me off at the Lutheran Peace Fellowship office. "Oh!" he said, "Where's your car?" "I don't have a car," I answered.

His eyes shifted back and forth as he tried to digest this most unusual statement. Then he looked at me with a combination of curiosity, compassion, and wariness and asked, "Are you a bad kid?" Ha! He knows what happens to him if he's naughty. His parents take away his cars, whether the big plastic one on the lawn or the little ones that fit into his hand. Are we making the same mistake when we draw conclusions about others without realizing that they might have different life experiences? On the other side of the coin, Matthew 20:1-16 reveals a God so inclusively generous that we are baffled.

UNDERSTANDING GOD AS INCLUSIVE PREPARES US TO SHARE THE GOOD NEWS

Many people outside the church do not see any image of God except for the church people they see in person, at work, or on television or in the newspaper. How will others know what God is? If we do not work for a world of peace with justice, how will others know that this is the world God wants? If we are not welcoming, how will others know they are being invited?

Most of my Chinese American friends and family are not Christian. Through their generosity and love, however, they have helped me to understand more of God's greatness and grace. I want to learn to share the faith in words that are welcoming to them. Most of all, I know I need to practice more love. I need to be prepared for those times when actions speak louder than words. In short, I feel that my spirit is engaged just where God wants me to be. I pray that the Holy Spirit will work in me so I can become more like the image of God as I understand it this far along my journey.

May God bless us as we seek together to be God's unabashedly welcoming, inviting, celebrating people!

Lily R. Wu is a writer and editorial consultant in New York. She is also a member of the ELCA Church Council.

THE POWER OF PRAYER



Prayer works, and it is never too early or late for God to begin a new undertaking in our lives. You never know where you may be when the power of prayer transforms your life. We most often expect this transformation to happen during a regular Sunday worship service, but prayer has been known to change hearts at the most unexpected times. For me, it happened while I was sitting on a bench in a hospital waiting room.

I share this experience of transforming prayer with you, linking each part with an image of God from the Bible.

The Lord is our righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6)

As a child, I remember kneeling and praying with my sisters and brothers by our mother's bed because I felt a desire to be closer to God. Mom did not call us to the bedside. We went because we felt drawn as we listened to her pray. It was at her bedside that I learned to pray for circumstances distressing my community and for conditions in the world. There I learned to connect God's Word to my personal life and to pray in the Word. Youthful kneeling in prayer taught me to listen to the concerns of others and to pray with them for their needs as an intercessor. It was through hearing the public prayer of others that I learned the righteousness of God and God's love for the broken world.

The Lord who heals you (Exodus 15:26)

Nearly two decades ago, at a very large public hospital in the Midwest, I experienced a personal transformation as a result of a confrontation with God in prayer. I went to the emergency room at the insistence of a nurse friend. While there, I was diagnosed with hypertension and referred to the blood pressure clinic. The following day I went to the clinic for further evaluation. I did not want to go to the public hospital. I did not want to wait for hours, nor did I think I should have to. But I went. People in the waiting room were swearing, talking loudly, looking and acting crazy, and yes, others, like me, were trying to ignore them.

At the time I was a student at a Bible school, preparing for final examinations. In order to block the others out as I waited for my 9:30 appointment, I sat

on a bench with my head buried in my books. When I realized that it was nearly 11:30, I rushed to the nurse's desk to see why my name had not been called, only to hear, "Go somewhere and sit down." I turned to see which of the out-of-control people she was talking to, but I was the only person standing in front of her. People were walking around, talking to themselves, eating, yelling at their children, totally frustrated by the system of service. I felt as if I was in the middle of the television show *ER* after a bus accident. I plodded back to my chair, sighing as I resolved to continue to wait. I knew I needed healing; I simply did not know what kind of healing awaited me.

God will provide (Genesis 22:8)

My prayer came quickly: "Lord, what is this all about? Why am I here? I have worked hard to remove myself from an environment like this. The likes of this foolishness truly disgusts me." Even I could not believe I was praying this kind of prayer. I ended up cutting the prayer off and refocusing so I could continue my reading. Then, in the middle of this madness and for only the second time in my life, I heard a still, small voice saying, "This is where I would have you be."

The words were so clear that I actually answered out loud before I realized that what I heard was not coming from anyone in the room. The words were not audible to anyone but me. Even so, not one person on the floor reacted when I said loudly, "WHAT?" Everyone was so used to hearing people talking loudly to the air that another outburst did not surprise them.

The God of peace (Hebrews 13:20)

My hands trembled as I closed my textbook and began for the first time to see the others in the waiting room as God's creation yearning to be acknowledged. This was the moment of truth. I sensed the real presence of abandonment, how it smelled, looked, and felt. I knew the real meaning of hopelessness.

I slipped my hand into my pocket and felt God's Word there in the form of tracts. I had been carrying these tracts to share with people who could and would use them. This good news was given to be shared with all, just as God through Christ had died for all. I began walking the corridor and placing the tracts in the hands of those sitting on the benches, waiting for medical attention.

The Lord is my banner (Exodus 17:15)

I looked only at their hands as I moved from one person to the next, sharing with them what God is like. I wanted to say, "I am sorry I was not willing at first to share these things about God with you. I am sorry I did not carry your concerns to God in prayer."

I do not know the impact of my sharing with God's children that day at the hospital. I truly believe it was the beginning of my personal transformation. I was in the middle of a harvest but could not see the good fruit because of its covering.

I now know that I am called to let my light shine where Jesus walked. I am called to share the good news of his death and resurrection with those in need of social, spiritual, economic, or physical healing. We are called to serve the poor, many of whom are well off financially but broken in spirit. Others are perishing because their lives have led them to distrust both humankind and God. Some are called to serve but fear rejection. They hide their gifts for another day. Many are speechless when they seek God in prayer.

The Lord is my shepherd (Psalm 23)

The old hospital building once housed over 1,100 patients, mostly poor people. God the Shepherd brought hope to the sick and dying. The halls of the old hospital were alive with personal and intercessory prayer. People spoke, touched, and agreed in prayer, and the Shepherd did the rest. Some were healed and went home, and others received a final healing, escaping this life and going to another.

Recently the hospital moved to a new facility across the street. For me it represented changing times and new tools for healing. Likewise, many today know other ways to communicate with the Shepherd. In ways seen and unseen, they partner in prayer, participate in prayer chains, connect with others through the Internet.

The Lord is there (Ezekiel 48:35)

In the last few years the ELCA has developed a prayer network to join individuals and congregations in intercessory prayer. Through the network, people all over the world are connected in prayer. By clicking on www.prayingchurch.org, we can view the site, download resources for prayer, join the discussion board, enter prayer requests, and read prayers of thanks for prayers answered in ways we could not imagine.

The same God who changed my thinking on that day in the hospital waiting room did not start or stop with me. It doesn't matter when or where we seek God's wisdom in prayer. What does matter is your earnest desire to know and trust God in this intimate way.

Whether in cyberspace or in verbal prayers, a hospital bench waits for each of us. There we all can be refreshed by the renewing power of God.

Kathryn Bradley-Love serves as the coordinator for prayer ministries in the ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries.

is already there. We simply have to recognize it.

Yet we may never consider looking to ourselves to find who is like God. We know all the reasons why we aren't like the divine. In an instant we can name our shortcomings and our failings, our guilt and our shame. But the mystery of God suggests that God's imprint still shines through all our failings and flaws. God's image is clearly upon us despite ourselves. Sometimes others recognize it in us; at other times we see glimpses of the divine in some other flawed human being.

So who is like God? Certainly none of us completely. The question is not simply rhetorical, as it was for the psalmist. God is like us as we go about in our ordinary humanity, in our mundane life, in our ordinariness. God is also like a

fortress, a source of strength and security beyond our own human abilities. God is both Like and Other. What that means for us will mean different things to different people. But it does mean that there is nothing about us that is innately different from God's nature, and nothing that keeps us from bearing God's imprint.

What if our churches were filled with pictures showing God making bread or sweeping the floor looking for that lost coin? What if our stained-glass windows were filled with pictures of biblical women like Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth, or the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, or Mary the mother of John Mark, who sheltered the church when James was martyred and Peter arrested? As we begin to find God's image in ourselves, in

biblical women, and in the women around us, we may begin to realize that God's divinity is limitlessly expressed in humanity. Each woman and each man, each boy and each girl, bears God's divine image. Knowing that allows us to let that image shine for ourselves and for others. Who is like God? No one completely, but everyone by virtue of baptism. Thanks be to God.

Lorraine S. Brugh is assistant professor of music and university organist at Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Ind. She is an associate in ministry and currently serves on the liturgical music and resource proposal groups for the ELCA's Renewing Worship project. She will serve as music director for the 2003 Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Winnipeg, Canada.

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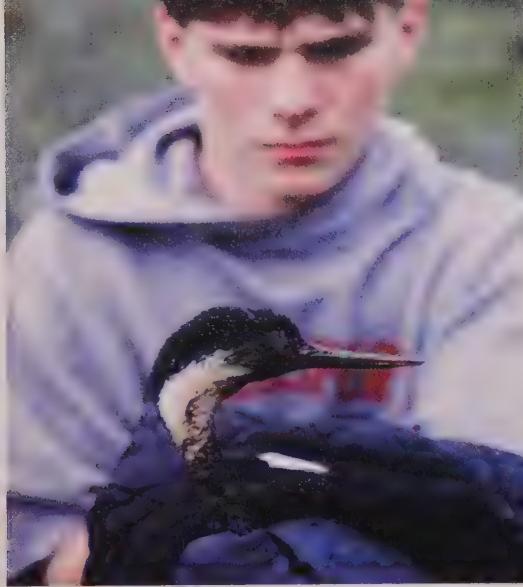
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Vacations WITH A PURPOSE

by Jan Johnson

How would you like to take a vacation that would change you, your children, or your grandchildren forever, a vacation after which you'd never be the same because you'd have a more loving heart for God and for this world God so loves?

The McGinnis family took a trip to Nicaragua and stayed with a family there. Jim McGinnis said, "There's nothing like that immersion experience into another culture to help children see that not everyone lives [like the folks on television]." On their trip, Theresa McGinnis, then 15 years old, bonded with 13-year-old Elizabeth, a member of the Nicaraguan family. Before they left, Elizabeth gave one of the only two shirts she owned to Theresa as a present. Overwhelmed by Elizabeth's love and generosity, Theresa knew she could never match such a gift. But she pulled out of her suitcase one of the nine shirts she'd brought with her and gave it to Elizabeth anyway. Jim said, "A kid remembers this forever."

Providing firsthand cross-cultural experiences for children and grandchildren makes more of a difference than anything else you can do. Why? These experiences foster relationships as well as acceptance and respect.

Such "exposure trips" change the way you see God, too. While I was in the Dominican Republic for a week covering a story, I discovered the rich experience of

bonding with someone who looks and sounds nothing like me. Even though we didn't speak each other's languages well, dressed drastically differently, and ate foods the other thought were strange, we felt a kinship. It changed me forever. I personally met kids who shared beds and lived in a home with cardboard walls and one light bulb hanging from the ceiling, powered by an extension cord stretched from another building. These people were not statistics; they were Gina, Pablo, and Maria.

The last thing you want to do when traveling is somehow offend someone inadvertently. Seasoned travelers recommend demonstrating an interest in the culture and becoming an asker of questions. Here are some ways to do that.

EXPOSURE VACATIONS

A number of organizations offer alternative family vacations and travel seminars. Ken and Gretchen Lovingood took their three grandchildren on such a tour to Jamaica. Says Gretchen, "It was 50-50. We did

tourist activities and exposure activities." They stayed in furnished housing but also visited tin-roof shacks with no plumbing. Gretchen describes visiting a settlement house, or orphanage: "It was at the edge of a slum. As Danielle, our granddaughter, walked by the nursery, she saw a baby crying and picked up the baby to hold it. . . . All she cared about was the fact that he cried and needed comfort. It was good to be able to talk about these experiences together."

ROOTS VACATIONS

Blanca and Raul Castro were born in the United States, and they wanted to take their kids to Puerto Rico, the place of their heritage. Blanca wanted to give her children something that would stay in their minds and hearts for the rest of their lives. She imagined it would also help give them something of a defense against the often overwhelming materialism that seems ever-present in American life.

The Castro children now tell their parents this was the best thing they could have done. Blanca says the families stayed in two little rooms, "but that wasn't the big deal—it was the warmth and hospitality. There, the poor people live on ranches and my kids loved seeing the cows run around. They enjoyed the simple life. They told me, 'Ma, this is so cool.'"

SERVING VACATIONS

When you serve people of another culture, you truly encounter the secrets of the culture and its people. The Painter family spent part of their vacation on a Zuñi reservation where they tutored students, assisted in janitorial projects, helped to program computers, and wrote grant proposals. Dale Painter said that no ordinary tour book could have led them into such an intriguing cultural experience. He described being allowed to make the hike up a cliff to a sacred mesa and seeing ancient petroglyphs on the way. This is where "thousands of

Zuñis fled to escape the conquistadors. Today non-Zuñis are forbidden to make this climb unless accompanied by someone from the reservation." Many such mission-oriented vacations offer insider information and experiences not usually available to visitors. What follows are guidelines from Dale Painter's experience.

Decide what part of the country you'd like to visit. Get out the maps. Dream. Have you wanted to live with the Amish or visit places you've seen in *National Geographic*?

Take inventory of your skills, interests, and talents. Besides professional skills, consider a change of pace with gardening, building, or writing.

Decide how much of your vacation you're going to volunteer. Even service ventures that last only a few hours can produce meaningful experiences and be deeply appreciated.

Evaluate how the children you are taking on the trip fit into the plans. What projects can they get involved in? Which settings appeal to their interests and sense of adventure? Be sensitive as you plan, and prepare them for a positive experience.

Consider traveling with a local youth group as a driver or chaperone. This way everything is already planned. All you need to do is follow along.

Contact organizations that connect people with projects needing volunteers.

These guidelines can help you and your family dream a little. What would you and your family enjoy doing, if time and money weren't constraints? Then talk with your family, dream a little more, and see what plans come of it. You will receive much more than you ever imagined.

Jan Johnson is a retreat leader and the author of 13 books, including *Growing Compassionate Kids*, from which this article is adapted. She lives with her family in Simi Valley, Calif.

The Gift of Generosity

by Faith L. Fretheim

THE GENEROSITY OF LUTHERAN WOMEN THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF ALL THE MOTHER ORGANIZATIONS THAT NOW COMPOSE WOMEN OF THE ELCA IS WELL KNOWN. ONE OF THE JOYS OF BEING ON THE STAFF SINCE 1988 HAS BEEN MEETING SOME OF THE RECIPIENTS OF THAT GENEROSITY.

Edna Wagschal e-mailed a response to a November 2002 *LWT* article that highlighted 81-year-old June Johnson, a 2001 scholarship recipient.

"I am also 81, but I received my first Cronk Memorial Scholarship when I was 19. That first \$300 enabled me to return to college for my junior year, and another \$300 the following year allowed me to graduate. In all the work I have done, the women have kept giving to me. Thank you to all the faithful women down through the years!"

Most of our scholarships have been in existence for many years, but two newer ones are the Arne Administrative Scholarship and the Schmieder Leadership Scholarship. And although most of the scholarships have been the idea of participants, the Schmieder Scholarship was the idea of Charlotte Fiechter, executive director of Women of the ELCA from 1989 to 1996. She read the intent of the Amalia I. Schmieder Memorial Funds and realized that the intent would fit with one of her goals: to fund a scholarship that would encourage growth in academic and administrative leadership among women on our ELCA college, university, and seminary faculties and staffs.

An applicant for this scholarship must be nominated by a letter from the president of her educational

institution. After she completes the course of study at a leadership institute of her choice, she must prepare a written report for Women of the ELCA.



Jenny Norris Peterson, major gifts consultant for Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota, was one of the 2002 recipients of this scholarship. From June 16 to June 28, she attended the Management Development Program at Harvard University, which is sponsored by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Jenny commented that the strength of the program was its use of case studies to analyze specific complicated situations in higher education.

Jenny observed, "I have never before had the chance to interact with such a culturally diverse group of professionals. One-third of the participants were people of color, who said that they felt freer to express themselves because they were not the only representative of their culture. . . . I have been to multicultural workshops in the past that emphasized the need for full representation and full voice by people of color, but I have never before experienced the incredible richness that comes from having these voices present in significant numbers. I will carry this new knowledge with me throughout my personal and professional life. Thank you, Women of the ELCA!"

Faith L. Fretheim is program director, Women of the ELCA.



Words and Images

by Linda Post Bushkofsky

SOMETIMES IN THE LAST 20 YEARS OR SO, THE WORDS AND IMAGES OF GOD I'D HELD FROM MY YOUTH GREW TOO CONFINING AND NARROW FOR ME. I GREW UP WITH MASCULINE IMAGES FOR GOD, SUCH AS FATHER, KING, AND MASTER. I sang the beloved hymns "This Is My Father's World" and "Children of the Heav'nly Father." Now, through greater biblical awareness and the opportunity to sing hymns that expand the imagery used for God, I have come to enlarge my own understanding of God.

For me, God is God. I still hold dear several images of God as father, but I've also come to expand my understanding to include feminine imagery. This is something that even our own Scripture does (see Isaiah 42:14, 46:3-4, and 49:15, in which the image used for God is a woman giving birth; or Luke 13:34, where Jesus speaks of himself as a mother hen). Frankly, our own human-created words are far too small to encompass our God. So I've come to a place in my faith journey where I prefer to talk about God simply and most profoundly as "God."

These days I join in singing such hymns as "Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth" (*With One Voice*, 769) and "When Twilight Comes" (*WOW*, 663), in which God's loving acts are likened to those of a mother hen who prepares her brood for the night: "Oh! What joy to feel her warm heartbeat and be near her all night long; so the young can find repose, then renew tomorrow's song."

None of us needs to give up the images of God that we hold dear, but we can work at broadening

our images of God so that they are at least as diverse as those in the Bible. The words and images used in our Women of the ELCA ministries should foster a welcoming environment where the graciousness, love, and concern of God in Christ are conveyed in all that is said, read, sung, and seen.

It's May, and here in the United States that brings Mother's Day. We honor those who give us life and those who care for and protect us with a mother's love. Many of us came to know of God and God's grace through the loving words and acts of our mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. How good it is, then, to consider the maternal images of our life-giving God.

*Mothering God, you gave me birth
in the bright morning of this world.
Creator, source of ev'ry breath,
you are my rain, my wind, my sun.*

*Mothering Christ, you took my form,
offering me your food of light,
grain of new life, and grape of love,
your very body for my peace.*

*Mothering Spirit, nurt'ring one,
in arms of patience hold me close,
so that in faith I root and grow
until I flow'r, until I know.*

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director, Women of the ELCA.

Naming Life

by Catherine Malotky

OUR BROTHER MOSES STOOD BEFORE THE BURNING BUSH AND ASKED BY WHAT NAME YOU SHOULD BE CALLED. YOU ANSWERED OBSCURELY, "I AM WHO I AM" (EXODUS 3:13-14).

You left the door wide open:

- When we need a warrior to fight for us, you are Warrior.
- When we need a sage to be wise and true, you are Sage.
- When we need a mother to rock away our pain, you are Mother.
- When we need a sovereign to give us order and identity, you are Sovereign.
- When we need a liberator to break our bondage, you are Liberator, our Messiah.

We call you, and you come. We ask for your name, and you respond by being who you are. You leave the door wide open. But you are more than a shape-changer or divine chameleon.

Through the wide-open door of the universe, you entered time and space. Once you took on flesh so that we might be able to see and hear and touch you. You took a name and a form we could understand, and then you were who you are.

You loved. You loved the unclean prostitute, the betraying tax collector, the grieving sisters, the scheming Pharisees, the bereft widow, the Samaritan woman, the blind man, and the bleeding woman. You loved those who crucified you.

And it seems every time you loved, there was new life. For those in need, new life was clear. For those who seemed to lose—the rich, the powerful, the proud—loss was new life as well. The new life you promise is full of justice and mercy. The new life you promise gives us all a place, gives us all worth, gives us all hope.

O Jesus, when I languish in the valley of the shadow of death, when I am Mary grieving at the tomb of one I love, call my name. Show me that you are real and that you live. When I am numbed by war and rumors of war, whether in my home or in my world, call my name and wake me up. Give me hope and courage. When I am overwhelmed by a world that seems not to care, gather me into your arms of welcome. Show me that I live, empowered by your love.

O Jesus, you have languished in the valley of the shadow of death. You have been numbed by war. You have been scorned. You have been crucified, and yet you live. In you, I see the promise you embody. I will not avoid the pain of living. Even you, who were honest, just, and true, suffered. But you rose again, time and time again, and finally, from death, you rose to live and breathe again.

Reveal to me the wonder of this promise, for I too shall rise to live and breathe again. I too sing with all the saints in light. You left the door wide open.

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as representative for Region 3. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, and parish pastor.

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Lord God, we come to adore you;
you are the ground of all that is.
You hold us in being; without you we could not be.
Before we were born, before time began,
before the universe came into being, you were;
when time is finished,
when the universe is no more,
you will still be.
Nothing can take your power from you.
And in your presence we can only be silent
before the mystery of your being,
for no words of ours can do justice
to your glory.

Morning Prayer from the Lutheran World Federation Ninth World Assembly, Hong Kong, July 16, 1997

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